

## CLAIMS

1. A network comprising:  
a first tier of forwarding agents connected to a first tier of network devices;  
a second tier of forwarding agents connected to a second tier of network devices;

5 and

a service manager configured to:

receive a packet from one of the forwarding agents;

determine the tier of the forwarding agent; and

send an instruction to the forwarding agent directing the forwarding agent

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to forward the packet to a network device connected to the tier of forwarding agents that includes the forwarding agent.

2. A network as recited in claim 1 wherein the first tier of network devices include state tracking network devices that keep track of the state of connections and wherein the service manager is further configured to:

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in the event that the tier of the forwarding agent is connected to one of the state tracking network devices, determine whether the packet belongs to a connection that has already been assigned to the state tracking network device; and

in the event that the connection has been assigned to the state tracking network device, selecting the same state tracking network device to receive the packet.

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3. A network as recited in claim 2 wherein the state tracking network device is a firewall.

- 25 4. A network as recited in claim 3 wherein the firewall is initially chosen by the service manager for a first packet that requests a connection and wherein the same firewall is chosen for a second packet that responds to the first packet.

5. A network as recited in claim 1 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is determined by the subnet of the forwarding agent.

6. A network as recited in claim 1 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is determined by the port of the forwarding agent.

7. A network as recited in claim 1 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is determined by the inclusion of the IP address of the forwarding agent in a list for the tier.

8. A network as recited in claim 1 wherein second tier of forwarding agents are also connected to the first tier of network devices.

9. A service manager configured to distribute packets to multiple tiers of forwarding agents comprising:

a network interface configured to receive packets from a first tier of forwarding agents connected to a first tier of network devices and a second tier of forwarding agents connected to a second tier of network devices; and

a processor configured to:

determine the tier of a sending forwarding agent that sends a packet; and

send an instruction to the sending forwarding agent directing the sending forwarding agent to forward the packet to a network device connected to the tier of forwarding agents that includes the sending forwarding agent.

10. A service manager as recited in claim 9 wherein the first tier of network devices include state tracking network devices that keep track of the state of connections and wherein the processor is further configured to:

in the event that the tier of the forwarding agent is connected to one of the state tracking network devices, determine whether the packet belongs to a connection that has already been assigned to the state tracking network device; and

in the event that the connection has been assigned to the state tracking network device, selecting the same state tracking network device to receive the packet.

11. A service manager as recited in claim 10 wherein the state tracking network  
5 device is a firewall.

12. A service manager as recited in claim 11 wherein the firewall is initially chosen  
by the service manager for a first packet that requests a connection and wherein the same  
firewall is chosen for a second packet that responds to the first packet.

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13. A service manager as recited in claim 9 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is  
determined by the subnet of the forwarding agent.

14. A service manager as recited in claim 9 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is  
15 determined by the port of the forwarding agent.

15. A service manager as recited in claim 9 wherein the tier of the forwarding agent is  
determined by the inclusion of the IP address of the forwarding agent in a list for the tier.

20 16. A method of distributing packets to multiple tiers of forwarding agents  
comprising:

receiving packets at a service manager from a first tier of forwarding agents  
connected to a first tier of network devices and a second tier of forwarding agents  
connected to a second tier of network devices;

25 determining the tier of a sending forwarding agent that sent a packet; and  
sending an instruction to the sending forwarding agent directing the sending  
forwarding agent to forward the packet to a network device connected to the tier  
of forwarding agents that includes the sending forwarding agent.

17. A computer program product for distributing packets to multiple tiers of forwarding agents, the computer program product being embodied in a computer readable medium and comprising computer instructions for:

determining a corresponding tier of a sending forwarding agent that sent a packet received at a service manager from a first tier of forwarding agents connected to a first tier of network devices and a second tier of forwarding agents connected to a second tier of network devices; and

sending an instruction to the sending forwarding agent directing the sending forwarding agent to forward the packet to a network device connected to the corresponding tier of forwarding agents.

18. A service manager configured to distribute packets to multiple tiers of forwarding agents comprising:

means for receiving packets from a first tier of forwarding agents connected to a first tier of network devices and a second tier of forwarding agents connected to a second tier of network devices;

means for determining the tier of a sending forwarding agent that sends a packet; and

means for sending an instruction to the sending forwarding agent directing the sending forwarding agent to forward the packet to a network device connected to the tier of forwarding agents that includes the sending forwarding agent.